

Flexible Working Practices and Employee Retention in England: An Integrative Review and Conceptual Framework of Post-COVID-19 Evidence

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ABSTRACT

Aim – This research aims to explore the link between flexible working practices and staff turnover in England after the onset of COVID-19. It will take a particular interest in how working flexibly might impact the likelihood of employees staying within an organisation and the conditions that influence this.

Design/methodology/approach – The study employs an integrative literature review approach to compile the evidence related to the English employment area after the COVID-19 pandemic. The main synthesis included eight empirical studies that focused on areas related to healthcare, education, policing, and social work. The analysis is based on Job Demands-Resources theory and Social Exchange theory to explain the relationship between flexible working, employee experience and retention.

Findings: The findings suggest that flexible working alone is not enough to boost staff retention. It may be more important to see if they can make good use of the flexibility that is offered. This experience is affected by managerial support, workload, organisational culture and the practical demands of various occupations. In the evidence that was reviewed, three conditions were especially significant, namely: meaningful employee control, organisational support and occupational feasibility. In these situations, flexible working could benefit work-life compatibility, autonomy and perceptions of organisation support thus facilitating continued work.

Originality/value – The paper separates formal opportunities for flex from employees' experience of flex. It suggests that experience of flexibility is a more relevant consideration of why people stay in the job than any policy availability and outlines a framework that links flexible working with employee retention through both the job and the employee/organisation relationship.

Keywords: Flexible working, employee retention, employee flexibility, organisational support, England, post-COVID-19

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INTRODUCTION

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, there has been significant restructuring of work. While flexible working arrangements have been around for a while, the Covid-19 pandemic has helped to drive them and change expectations on where, when and how work can be done. This has brought remote, hybrid, flexitime, compressed hours, part-time and other types of flexibility more to the fore in today's workplace. These changes have been seen to have continued since the onset of the pandemic in Great Britain. For instance, according to the Office for National Statistics (2024), 28 per cent of working adults in Great Britain worked remotely and in the office in the autumn of 2024.

In addition to these changes employee retention is a crucial organisational and human resource management issue. Leaving of employees on a voluntary basis can create recruitment and replacement costs, create disruptions within teams, decrease workforce continuity, and create a loss of organisational knowledge and experience. Such outcomes can be especially pronounced in jobs and industries that are in chronic staffing shortage. Theoretically and practically, it is important to understand that the behaviour of employees to stay with or leave their employers are influenced by organisational practices.

One area that may be important in seeking to retain employees is flexible working. Greater flexibility in terms of the location, timing and duration of working could enhance the ability of employees

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to balance work and caring, health and other non-work demands. Flexible arrangements can also help to boost employees' sense of autonomy and control. Such experiences could play a role in job satisfaction, organisational commitment and higher intentions to stay with an employer.

The relationship won't always be positive though. Various types of flexible working arrangements can be implemented in various ways. For example, Tsen et al. (2022) show that flexible working practices have a mediating effect on the relationship between intention to quit and organisational commitment and work-family conflict. This indicates that flexible working must not be considered as a one-size-fits-all approach for both workers and workplaces.

Flexibility can add additional requirements. Working remotely or in a hybrid environment might decrease informal contact, make communication and coordination more difficult, or make it harder to distinguish between work and non-work life, and/or establish

a sense of availability. There may also be significant differences between occupational groups in terms of access to flexibility. An employee engaged in knowledge-based activities in an office may be able to have more flexibility in working locations than someone like a nurse, teacher, police officer or social worker who is required to be physically present or who needs to provide direct service.

Therefore, having flexible working, as well as implementing it, can be important. This distinction is shown by evidence of voluntary resignations of police officers in England and Wales. Organisational inflexibility is one of the factors cited by Charman and Tyson (2024) in some officers' resignation decisions, especially when their working arrangements were deemed to be at odds with health, caring or evolving personal needs. This is indicative of the fact that the formal presence of an organisational policy does not guarantee that the policy will have an impact on employee flexibility.

This is especially important in today's job market, which is largely affected by COVID-19. There has been an increasing awareness of flexible working in organisational policy, with uneven access. There is strong evidence from the Office for Statistics (2024) that there are significant differences in hybrid working by occupation and employee characteristics. Therefore, the extent to which an organisation formally offers flexibility could be less informative than what it does if it is investigated as to whether they can gain access and adopt arrangements that are flexible in relation to their work and life circumstances.

It is therefore important to consider the link between flexible working and retention as a series of organisational and employee level processes. Flexible working could affect autonomy, work-life balance, work-family interaction and perceptions of organizational support. These experiences can then shape employees' job satisfaction and organisational commitment, which will in turn impact on their intentions to stay or leave. These potential benefits can become reality depending on managerial support, organisational culture and occupational feasibility.

Although there is increased research interest in flexible working, the evidence is still scattered in terms of the types of flexibility, the work contexts and the outcomes of flexible working. Research on remote work, hybrid work, working time and/or working place flexibility, part-time working etc. Retention is also measured in terms of actual turnover, voluntary resignation, turnover intention, intention to leave and intention to stay. Other research centers on related measures like satisfaction with the job, autonomy, work-life balance and organisational commitment.

The fragmentation poses an important analytical challenge. Rather, it is important to note that evidence of flexible working being associated with increased job satisfaction does not necessarily translate to evidence of flexible working being associated with increased retention. However, it is equally important to recognise that ignoring such evidence would restrict the knowledge of how flexible working can ultimately impact on employees' intentions to stay. Thus, a theoretically-informed synthesis is needed which separates direct retention outcomes from intermediate mechanisms.

The English context can be helpful in studying these relationships. The evidence identified for this review is spread across a range of healthcare, education, policing and social work and related organisations and also across a number of England-specific examples in the private-sector and professional-service organisations. This uneven distribution across sectors alone should be explored as it would be interesting to determine how far current levels of knowledge of flexible working and retention can be extrapolated to the English workforce.

This study, therefore, aims to conduct an integrative review of the evidence that has emerged since the onset of COVID-19 on flexible working practices and employee retention in England. The review does not just ask if flexible working is linked to retention, but also how and under what organisational conditions different types of flexible working lead to outcomes related to retention. The study draws from Job Demands-Resources theory and Social Exchange Theory, with a focus on direct evidence of retention as well as evidence of the employee and organisational processes that may explain how flexibility can influence retention. The overarching research question is:

How and under what organisational conditions do flexible working practices influence employee retention in England in the post-COVID-19 era?

Four supporting research questions guide the review:

RQ1. What forms of flexible working practices have been examined in relation to employee retention in England following COVID-19?

RQ2. What relationships have been identified between flexible working practices and employee retention, turnover intention and intention to stay?

RQ3. Through which employee-level and organisational mechanisms do flexible working practices influence retention?

RQ4. What contextual factors strengthen or weaken the relationship between flexible working practices and employee retention?

The study seeks to make three principal contributions. First, it integrates a fragmented body of post-COVID evidence concerning flexible working and retention within the English organisational context. Second, it moves beyond a simple direct-effect perspective by distinguishing retention outcomes from the mechanisms through which flexible working may influence them. Third, it develops a conceptual framework explaining how flexible-working practices interact with employee control, organisational support and contextual conditions to influence retention.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Flexible working practices

Flexible working is an umbrella term encompassing employment arrangements that alter or provide discretion over when, where or for how long work is performed. These arrangements can include flexitime, remote and home working, hybrid working, compressed working hours, part-time work and job sharing.

Although grouped under the same broad concept, these arrangements should not be assumed to be functionally equivalent. Temporal flexibility concerns when work is undertaken, spatial flexibility concerns where it occurs, and workload- or hours-based flexibility changes the duration or distribution of work. Different arrangements may therefore influence employees through different mechanisms and may be more or less feasible depending on occupational requirements.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of location-based flexibility, particularly among employees whose work could be performed remotely. The persistence of hybrid working after the removal of pandemic restrictions indicates that flexible working has become an established organisational issue rather than simply an emergency response. Nevertheless, access remains uneven across occupations and socioeconomic groups (Office for National Statistics, 2024).

Flexible working can potentially provide employees with greater control over work and enable them to accommodate



personal responsibilities. At the same time, poorly implemented flexibility may create isolation, blurred work-life boundaries, coordination problems or work intensification. Its organisational consequences therefore depend not only on whether flexibility exists, but on its form, accessibility and implementation.

Tsen et al. (2022) demonstrate this complexity by showing that different flexible-working arrangements can influence turnover intention through different pathways, including organisational commitment and work-family conflict. The implication is that flexible working should be analysed as a multidimensional organisational practice rather than a binary benefit that is either present or absent.

Employee retention and turnover intention

Employee retention concerns the continuation of the employment relationship between employees and organisations. It has important organisational consequences because voluntary turnover can result in replacement costs, disruption, loss of knowledge and reduced workforce stability.

A distinction is necessary between actual retention and employees' intentions concerning future employment. Much organisational research examines turnover intention or intention to stay because observed turnover requires longitudinal data that are not always available. Although behavioural intentions are not equivalent to actual behaviour, turnover intention is an established predictor of subsequent employee turnover (Griffeth et al., 2000; Hom et al., 2017).

For this review, direct retention-related outcomes therefore include actual retention, voluntary turnover, voluntary resignation, turnover intention, intention to leave, intention to quit and intention to stay.

Job satisfaction, work-life balance, autonomy, perceived organisational support and organisational commitment are treated differently. They are not classified as retention outcomes in their own right. Instead, they are considered potential mechanisms through which flexible working may influence retention.

Maintaining this distinction is important. If flexible working increases autonomy and autonomy increases job satisfaction, which subsequently reduces turnover intention, the intermediate outcomes contribute to an explanation of retention without themselves constituting evidence of actual retention.

Job Demands-Resources theory

The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model distinguishes between aspects of work that require sustained physical or psychological effort and aspects that help employees achieve work goals, reduce demands or support development (Demerouti et al., 2001). Subsequent development of JD-R theory emphasises the role of resources in supporting employee motivation and wellbeing and in buffering the effects of demanding work conditions (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007, 2017).

Flexible working can be interpreted as a potential job resource. Greater control over working time or location may reduce commuting demands, increase autonomy or enable employees to reconcile employment with caring and other personal responsibilities.

However, flexible working can also create or intensify demands. Remote work may increase isolation or weaken boundaries between work and home. Flexible scheduling may be of limited value where workloads remain excessive, and location flexibility may have little practical meaning in occupations requiring substantial physical presence.

The same nominal flexible-working arrangement may therefore operate as a resource for one employee but as an additional demand for another. JD-R theory consequently provides a useful explanation for why the relationship between flexible working and retention may vary between occupations and organisational settings.

Social Exchange Theory and perceived organisational support

Social Exchange Theory provides a complementary explanation. Blau (1964) conceptualised social exchange as a relationship in which beneficial actions can create reciprocal obligations between parties. Within organisations, favourable treatment from employers may consequently generate positive employee attitudes and behaviours.

This logic is closely connected with perceived organisational support. Eisenberger et al. (1986) proposed that employees form general beliefs concerning whether their organisation values their contribution and cares about their wellbeing. Perceived organisational support has subsequently been associated with organisational commitment and withdrawal-related outcomes (Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002).

Meaningful access to flexible working may function as a signal of organisational support. Where organisations respond constructively to employees' caring responsibilities, health needs or preferences concerning the organisation of work, employees may interpret this treatment as evidence that the organisation values their circumstances.

The opposite may also occur. Formal policies that employees cannot realistically access may weaken perceptions of organisational support. Charman and Tyson's (2024) analysis of voluntary resignations among police officers in England and Wales is relevant here because organisational inflexibility formed part of some employees' experiences leading to resignation.

Social Exchange Theory therefore suggests that the retention effect of flexible working may depend substantially on how flexibility is implemented and experienced rather than on policy availability alone.

An integrated theoretical perspective

JD-R theory and Social Exchange Theory explain different but complementary aspects of the proposed relationship.

JD-R theory focuses on employees' experience of work. Flexible arrangements may increase resources such as autonomy and control or reduce demands associated with commuting and work-family conflict. Conversely, they may generate demands through isolation, boundary blurring or work intensification.

Social Exchange Theory focuses on the employee-organisation relationship. Meaningful flexibility may communicate organisational support, trust and reciprocity, whereas inaccessible or inconsistently implemented flexibility may communicate the opposite.

Bringing these perspectives together suggests that flexible-working practices may influence retention through both experienced job resources and perceptions of organisational treatment.

The theoretical relationship can therefore be expressed as

Flexible-working practices → experienced flexibility and employee control → autonomy, work-life compatibility and perceived organisational support → job satisfaction and organisational commitment → intention to stay/lower turnover intention → employee retention.

This pathway is unlikely to operate independently of context. Managerial support, organisational culture, occupational requirements, employee circumstances and the practical feasibility of different forms of flexibility may strengthen, weaken or alter these relationships.

The integrative review therefore does not begin from the assumption that flexible working universally improves retention. Instead, it investigates which arrangements appear relevant, how they operate and under what organisational circumstances they may contribute to employees' willingness or ability to remain.

METHODOLOGY

Review design

This study adopts an integrative literature review design to examine flexible working practices and employee retention in England during the post-COVID-19 period.

An integrative review was selected because the available literature is methodologically and conceptually diverse. Relevant evidence includes qualitative studies of employee experience, quantitative research, mixed-method studies and studies examining both direct retention outcomes and intermediate mechanisms such as work-life balance, autonomy, organisational support and job satisfaction.

The integrative review approach is particularly appropriate where the purpose of a review extends beyond estimating a single common effect and instead seeks to integrate heterogeneous evidence, identify patterns and contradictions, and develop new conceptual understanding (Whittemore and Knafl, 2005; Torraco, 2005). Literature reviews can constitute a research methodology in their own right where the process of identifying, evaluating and synthesising literature is conducted transparently and aligned with the research question (Snyder, 2019).

The objective of the present review is therefore not to claim exhaustive coverage of every publication concerning flexible working in England. Rather, it is to provide a rigorous, transparent and theoretically informed synthesis of relevant post-COVID evidence and to use that synthesis to develop a conceptual explanation of the relationship between flexible working and employee retention.

Review process

The review process was informed by established guidance on integrative literature reviews. Whittemore and Knafl (2005) identify a structured process involving problem identification, literature searching, data evaluation, data analysis and presentation. Torraco (2005) similarly emphasises that an integrative review should move beyond description of individual publications and critically synthesise the literature in a way that generates new perspectives or conceptual understanding.

The present review therefore involved five broad stages:

- Definition of the research problem and conceptual scope;
- Targeted identification of relevant literature;
- Assessment of relevance and methodological quality;
- Structured extraction and comparison of evidence; and
- Thematic integration and development of a conceptual framework.

An audit trail was maintained throughout the review to document candidate studies, inclusion decisions, exclusion reasons, full-text verification, methodological appraisal and the contribution of individual studies to the developing synthesis.

Scope and conceptual boundaries

Flexible working is defined as an employment arrangement that provides variation or discretion concerning the location, timing, scheduling or duration of work. Relevant practices include remote working, homeworking, hybrid working, flexitime, flexible scheduling, compressed hours, part-time working, job sharing and comparable arrangements.

The principal outcome of interest is employee retention. Direct retention-related outcomes include employee or staff retention, voluntary turnover, voluntary resignation, turnover intention, intention to leave, intention to quit and intention to stay.

The review distinguishes between direct retention evidence and mechanism evidence.

Direct retention evidence comprises empirical studies in which flexible working is examined in relation to an explicit retention-related outcome.

Mechanism evidence comprises empirical studies examining flexible working in relation to theoretically relevant intermediate outcomes or experiences that may help explain retention. These include autonomy, employee control, work-life balance, work-family interaction, perceived organisational support, professional trust, job satisfaction and organisational commitment.

Mechanism outcomes are not treated as equivalent to retention. A study showing that flexible working improves job satisfaction, for example, is not interpreted as direct evidence that flexible working reduces turnover. Instead, it contributes to understanding the pathway through which flexible working may influence retention.

Temporal and geographical scope

The review concentrates primarily on evidence published from January 2021 to August 2026 in order to capture the organisational context created by and following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Publication date alone was not considered sufficient to classify evidence as post-COVID. Where underlying empirical data were collected entirely before the pandemic, the study was excluded from the primary post-COVID synthesis but could be retained for theoretical background where relevant.

The principal geographical focus is England.

Studies based directly in England were prioritised. Studies covering England and Wales or the wider United Kingdom were considered where they provided important conceptual or contextual evidence, but were not automatically interpreted as England-specific findings.

This distinction was maintained because England, Great Britain and the United Kingdom are not geographically interchangeable.

Literature identification strategy

Because access to subscription bibliographic databases was not available for the present review, the evidence-identification process used a structured targeted-search and citation-chaining strategy rather than claiming a comprehensive bibliographic database search.

Academic literature was identified through combinations of scholarly web searching, publisher journal platforms, institutional repositories, PubMed and PubMed Central where relevant to healthcare research, DOI and exact-title verification, and backward and forward citation searching from relevant publications.

Searches combined terms relating to flexible working with retention-related concepts and geographical terms.

Flexible-working search terminology included "flexible working", "flexible work arrangements", "hybrid working", "remote



working", "working from home", "homeworking", "flexitime", "flexible hours", "flexible scheduling", "compressed hours", "part-time working", "job sharing" and "agile working".

Retention terminology included "employee retention", "staff retention", "intention to stay", "turnover intention", "intention to leave", "employee turnover", "voluntary turnover", "voluntary resignation" and "return to work".

The principal geographical term was England. Supplementary searches used terms including United Kingdom, UK, Great Britain and sector-specific terminology such as NHS, nursing, schools, policing and social work to identify studies whose relevance to England might not be apparent from titles alone.

The search was expanded by sector to reduce the risk that the review would become limited to one occupational context. Targeted searches considered healthcare and the NHS, policing, education, social work, professional services, public-sector organisations and private-sector employment.

Search decisions and candidate records were documented in a master evidence-extraction database.

Evidence selection

Potentially relevant studies were assessed according to their relationship to the research questions rather than according to publication title alone.

Peer-reviewed empirical studies were prioritised for the principal synthesis.

A study was considered for inclusion where it:

- Concerned employees or organisational settings relevant to England;
- Examined a recognisable form of flexible working;
- Reported either a direct retention-related outcome or a theoretically relevant explanatory mechanism;
- Provided original empirical evidence;
- Was published in English; and
- Was sufficiently reported to permit meaningful interpretation.

Studies were excluded from the primary evidence synthesis where flexible working was not substantively examined; the study concerned retention but did not contain a relevant flexibility component; the empirical evidence was entirely pre-pandemic; the geographical context could not reasonably inform England; the publication was non-empirical; or the study concerned an outcome too distant from the review question.

Relevant government publications, commissioned evidence reviews and official statistics were retained as contextual evidence rather than treated as equivalent to peer-reviewed empirical research.

Evidence categories

The evidence was classified into three categories to maintain conceptual clarity.

Category A

Core retention evidence. This category contains peer-reviewed empirical studies examining flexible working together with an explicit retention-related outcome, including actual departure, intention to leave, intention to remain or conditions associated with returning to employment.

Category B

Mechanism evidence. This category contains peer-reviewed empirical studies examining flexible working together with intermediate employee or organisational experiences relevant to

the explanation of retention. Examples include employee control, work-life compatibility, professional trust, perceived organisational support and job satisfaction.

Category C

Contextual evidence. This category contains government publications, official statistics and studies that inform theory or organisational context but do not meet all criteria for inclusion in the principal post-COVID England synthesis.

Maintaining these categories reduces the risk of overstating evidence. A mechanism study, for example, can inform the explanation of retention without being represented as proof that flexible working reduces actual turnover.

Quality appraisal

Methodological quality was considered separately from topical relevance.

The Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) was used as a structured aid for appraisal of eligible qualitative, quantitative and mixed-method empirical studies (Hong et al., 2018).

The appraisal considered whether research questions were clearly stated, whether the collected data were appropriate to address those questions, and whether design-specific criteria concerning sampling, data collection, analysis and interpretation were adequately addressed.

The MMAT was not converted into a simple overall numerical score. Criterion-level judgements and narrative appraisal notes were instead recorded in the evidence-extraction database.

This approach reflects the purpose of quality appraisal within the present review: not to create an artificial ranking of studies, but to ensure that methodological limitations are considered when interpreting the strength of individual findings.

Data extraction

A structured master evidence-extraction table was developed and maintained throughout the review.

Each candidate study received a unique identifier. Recorded fields included author and publication year; sector and occupational setting; sample; research design; flexible-working arrangement; retention-related outcome; explanatory mechanism; theoretical framework; principal findings; limitations; DOI; peer-review status; relevance to England; full-text verification status; evidence category; inclusion decision; MMAT design category and criterion-level judgements; and source-verification status.

The extraction process distinguished verified information from information requiring further confirmation. Missing methodological details were not inferred where they could not be substantiated.

Analysis and synthesis

The evidence was analysed through an iterative process combining descriptive comparison and thematic synthesis.

The first stage mapped the literature according to sector, occupational context, type of flexible working, research design and retention-related outcome.

The second stage examined studies providing direct retention evidence to identify how flexible-working arrangements were associated with decisions to remain, leave or potentially return.

The third stage examined mechanism evidence to identify recurring processes through which flexible working may affect retention. The principal categories included autonomy and employee control; work-life compatibility; caring and health-related accommodation; perceived organisational support; professional

trust; job satisfaction; and organisational commitment.

The analysis remained open to themes emerging from the evidence rather than forcing all findings into predetermined theoretical categories.

The fourth stage considered contextual and boundary conditions, particularly managerial support, organisational culture, occupational feasibility, workload, caring responsibilities and individual health circumstances.

Contradictory and qualifying findings were retained. The purpose of the integrative synthesis was not to demonstrate that flexible working invariably improves retention, but to understand the circumstances in which flexibility appears to support or fail to support continued employment.

Development of the conceptual framework

The final analytical stage integrated the empirical synthesis with Job Demands-Resources theory and Social Exchange Theory.

JD-R theory was used to examine whether flexible working operated as a resource through increased autonomy, control and capacity to manage work and personal demands, or whether it introduced additional job demands.

Social Exchange Theory was used to examine the extent to which meaningful access to flexibility could communicate organisational support, trust and responsiveness.

The evidence was therefore interpreted through an emerging distinction between formal flexibility and experienced flexibility.

Formal flexibility concerns the existence of policies or arrangements within an organisation.

Experienced flexibility concerns the extent to which employees can actually access and use working arrangements that provide meaningful control and compatibility with their circumstances.

The conceptual framework was developed iteratively through dialogue between theory and the reviewed evidence rather than imposed on the literature in advance.

Methodological transparency and limitations

The principal methodological limitation of the review is that it does not claim exhaustive bibliographic database coverage. Direct searches of subscription databases such as Scopus, Web of Science Core Collection and Business Source Complete were not available.

The study should therefore be understood as a structured integrative review rather than a comprehensive systematic review.

This limitation is important because relevant studies may exist that were not identified through the targeted scholarly-search, publisher, repository and citation-chaining strategy.

Several steps were taken to reduce this risk. Search terminology was broadened beyond “flexible working” to include specific forms such as hybrid work, part-time work, agile working and job sharing. Searches were conducted across multiple occupational sectors, and relevant publications were used for backward and forward citation searching.

A second limitation concerns the English geographical focus. Research is frequently reported at UK level without separate England findings, potentially excluding otherwise relevant evidence.

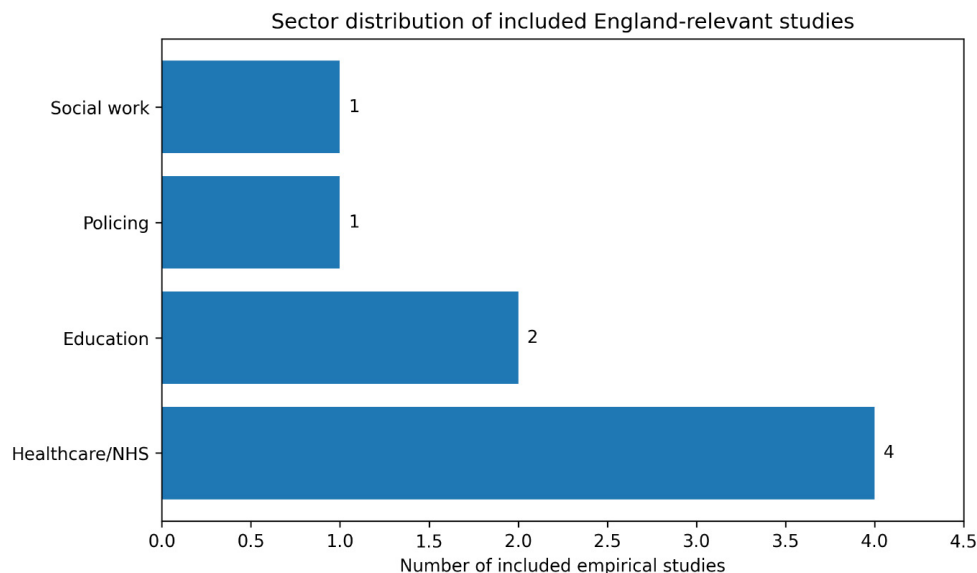
Third, the available evidence is methodologically heterogeneous and concentrated heavily in public and publicly funded services. This limits the extent to which findings can be generalised to the entire English workforce.

These limitations do not prevent conceptual synthesis, but they require appropriate caution when interpreting the breadth and strength of the conclusions.

FINDINGS

Profile and distribution of the reviewed evidence

The integrative review identified eight England-relevant post-COVID empirical studies that contributed directly either to the retention synthesis or to the explanation of mechanisms through which flexible working may influence retention. The evidence was



Source: authors' evidence-extraction dataset.

Figure 1: Sector distribution of included England-relevant empirical studies



not evenly distributed across organisational sectors. Four of the eight studies (50 per cent) concerned NHS or healthcare work (Alkan et al., 2026; Chamanga et al., 2025; Ejebu et al., 2025; Remnant et al., 2025), two studies (25 per cent) concerned education (Cook et al., 2026; Quickfall, 2025), one examined policing (Charman and Tyson, 2024), and one concerned children's social work (Murphy, 2026).

The sectoral distribution is analytically important. The evidence base is dominated by occupations in which employees generally cannot rely on extensive home or remote working because substantial elements of the role require physical presence or direct service delivery. As a result, the meaning of flexible working within the reviewed studies extends considerably beyond hybrid working. Relevant arrangements include part-time work, flexible scheduling, job sharing, agile working, alternative work patterns and organisational accommodation of health or caring circumstances.

This distinction suggests that flexible working should not be understood narrowly as synonymous with remote working. Within frontline and public-service occupations, its organisational value may instead depend on whether employees have meaningful discretion over working hours, scheduling, workload arrangements or the organisation of particular job responsibilities.

The distribution also reveals a limitation in the current knowledge base. Comparatively little England-specific post-COVID peer-reviewed evidence was identified concerning the relationship between flexible working and retention in private-sector and professional-service organisations. The findings of this review should therefore not be interpreted as representative of all employees in England. Rather, they provide particularly strong insight into organisational contexts where flexibility must be reconciled with substantial occupational constraints.

Flexible working is associated with retention, but not as an isolated intervention

Across the reviewed studies, flexible working rarely emerged as an independent or sufficient explanation of employee retention. Instead, flexibility operated as one component within a broader system of organisational conditions that shaped whether employees regarded continued employment as sustainable.

The most direct evidence comes from employees who had already left or were considering whether employment remained viable. Charman and Tyson (2024), examining voluntary resignation among police officers in England and Wales, demonstrate that organisational inflexibility can become part of the process leading employees to leave. Difficulties securing arrangements compatible with caring responsibilities, health conditions or reduced-hours working contributed to perceptions that continued employment was increasingly difficult to sustain.

A comparable pattern is evident in Murphy's (2026) study of former child-protection social workers. Flexible and agile working arrangements were among the organisational changes relevant to whether former practitioners might consider returning. However, flexibility was not sufficient on its own. Workload, bureaucracy, unpaid overtime and wider organisational conditions also influenced decisions concerning continued or renewed participation in the profession.

The nursing evidence produces a similar conclusion. Ejebu et al. (2025) identify flexible working patterns as part of the workplace expectations that matter for retaining nurses at different career stages. Alkan et al. (2026) found flexible work schedules to be widely experienced and regarded as an important component of district-nursing retention strategies. Chamanga et al. (2025) similarly identify workplace flexibility alongside leadership, organisational

values, family circumstances, professional development and job satisfaction as factors affecting community-nurse recruitment and retention.

Taken together, these studies do not support a simple proposition that providing flexible working automatically increases retention. Instead, they suggest a more conditional relationship:

flexibility contributes to retention when it makes continued employment more practically and psychologically sustainable within a supportive organisational environment.

This distinction is important because it changes the organisational question from whether flexibility is available to whether flexibility meaningfully changes employees' experience of work.

The central mechanism is experienced flexibility rather than policy availability

A consistent pattern across sectors concerns the difference between the formal provision of flexibility and employees' actual experience of it.

Organisations may formally permit flexible working without employees necessarily experiencing meaningful control over when, where or how work is undertaken. This gap between policy availability and practical accessibility emerged particularly clearly where employees had caring responsibilities, health conditions or workloads that made standard working arrangements difficult to sustain.

Charman and Tyson (2024) demonstrate the consequences of organisational inflexibility when employees require adjustment to their working arrangements. Similarly, Remnant et al. (2025) show that rigid organisational procedures may conflict with the needs of NHS employees experiencing fluctuating long-term health conditions. Locally responsive and adapted arrangements, by contrast, may enable employment to remain sustainable.

The nursing evidence reinforces this pattern. Ejebu et al. (2025) indicate that the value of flexibility is closely connected with employees' ability to reconcile employment with caring responsibilities, health circumstances and different career-stage priorities. Flexibility therefore appears valuable not simply because employees prefer it, but because it can change the practical feasibility of remaining in employment.

These findings support a distinction between two organisational constructs:

Formal flexibility refers to the existence of flexible-working policies, schemes or contractual arrangements.

Experienced flexibility refers to the degree of meaningful control employees actually obtain over work in ways that are compatible with their occupational and personal circumstances.

The reviewed evidence suggests that the second construct may be more important for retention than the first.

This distinction provides a stronger explanation of why organisations with apparently similar flexible-working policies may experience different retention outcomes. Policies create the possibility of flexibility, but managerial decisions, workloads, occupational requirements and organisational culture determine whether that possibility becomes a meaningful employee resource.

Work-life compatibility is a major pathway connecting flexibility with retention

Work-life compatibility emerged as one of the most consistent mechanisms connecting flexible working with continued employment.

Across nursing, education and policing, employees' needs for flexibility were frequently associated with caring responsibilities, family circumstances, health needs or difficulties reconciling organisational working patterns with non-work responsibilities.

The significance of this mechanism is particularly apparent in occupations where employees cannot simply relocate substantial portions of their work to the home. In such settings, flexibility may depend on changes to scheduling, working hours, job sharing or the allocation of specific work activities.

Ejebu et al. (2025) show that nurses' retention-related employment preferences are shaped partly by the ability to accommodate work alongside personal circumstances. Remnant et al. (2025) similarly demonstrate why organisational adaptability may be important for employees whose health conditions fluctuate over time.

Quickfall's (2025) study of teacher-mothers provides a particularly useful qualification. Part-time working can enable continued participation in teaching, but nominally reduced working hours do not necessarily create genuine work-life compatibility. Where workload expectations remain disproportionately high, employees may experience what amounts to full-time effort within a part-time contractual arrangement.

This finding demonstrates why the quantity of flexibility and the quality of flexibility should be distinguished.

Reduced hours, flexible schedules or hybrid arrangements provide limited retention value where workload demands remain unchanged.

From a Job Demands-Resources perspective, flexibility is therefore most likely to operate as a genuine job resource when it reduces or redistributes relevant demands while simultaneously increasing employee control.

Where the formal arrangement changes but underlying demands remain constant, the resource value of flexibility may be weakened substantially.

Managerial implementation is a critical boundary condition

The reviewed evidence also indicates that line management and organisational implementation shape the relationship between flexible working and retention.

Flexible working is rarely experienced as an abstract organisational policy. Employees encounter flexibility through managerial decisions concerning requests, scheduling, workload allocation, attendance expectations and the legitimacy of using available arrangements.

This is evident in Charman and Tyson's (2024) analysis, where employees' experiences of organisational inflexibility contributed to resignation. Remnant et al. (2025) likewise identify tensions between rigid organisational systems and more locally responsive approaches to supporting employees.

Chamanga et al. (2025) further position workplace flexibility within a broader organisational environment involving leadership, values and job satisfaction. This suggests that the retention consequences of flexibility depend partly on how line managers interpret and operationalise organisational policy.

The evidence therefore supports the following proposition: Managerial support operates as a conversion mechanism through which formal flexible-working policies become—or fail to become—experienced flexibility.

This has important implications for Social Exchange Theory. Where managers respond constructively to legitimate employee needs, flexible working may communicate organisational concern,

respect and support. Employees may consequently perceive a stronger reciprocal relationship with the employer.

Conversely, where policies formally exist but requests are discouraged, inconsistently approved or accompanied by career penalties, employees may interpret organisational behaviour as evidence of limited support.

Flexible working can therefore generate positive social-exchange effects only when the organisation's implementation is consistent with the supportive message that the policy is intended to communicate.

Professional trust represents an additional organisational mechanism

Professional trust emerged as a further mechanism, particularly within education.

Cook et al. (2026) demonstrate that flexible working within schools is embedded in professional relationships rather than functioning only as an individual employment arrangement. Greater discretion over aspects of work can communicate trust in employees' professional competence and judgement.

This observation expands the theoretical significance of flexibility.

Flexible working may provide a practical resource by increasing employee control, but it may simultaneously provide a relational resource by communicating organisational trust.

This mechanism creates a point of intersection between Job Demands-Resources theory and Social Exchange Theory.

From a JD-R perspective, discretion and autonomy represent resources that can help employees manage work demands. From a social-exchange perspective, being trusted to exercise that discretion may strengthen perceptions of organisational support and reciprocity.

Professional trust may therefore explain why apparently small changes in working arrangements can have effects that extend beyond convenience. The organisational meaning attached to flexibility may influence employees' broader interpretation of their relationship with the employer.

Occupational feasibility shapes which forms of flexibility can generate retention value

A major cross-study finding concerns occupational feasibility.

The reviewed evidence demonstrates that flexible working does not represent a standardised organisational intervention. The practical meaning of flexibility differs significantly between occupations.

An office-based professional may obtain meaningful flexibility through several days of homeworking each week. A nurse providing direct patient care cannot obtain the same degree of spatial flexibility. A teacher may have little discretion over classroom location but may benefit from job sharing, part-time arrangements or flexibility in non-contact work. Police officers and child-protection social workers face different operational constraints again.

The relevant organisational issue is therefore not whether all employees receive identical flexible-working arrangements.

Instead, the evidence points towards the concept of job-compatible flexibility: flexibility designed around the operational characteristics of a role while still providing meaningful employee control.

This is an important boundary condition within the emerging framework.



A flexible-working arrangement is unlikely to improve retention simply because it resembles a practice successful in another occupation. Its value depends on whether the arrangement addresses the demands employees actually experience within their particular form of work.

This finding also cautions against transferring conclusions from hybrid knowledge-work research directly to frontline occupations.

Flexible working can operate simultaneously as a resource and a demand

Although the evidence generally identifies potential retention benefits from flexibility, those benefits are conditional.

Flexible working can increase autonomy, enable caring or health accommodation, improve work-life compatibility and communicate organisational support.

At the same time, poorly designed arrangements can create additional demands or leave existing demands unchanged.

Part-time working illustrates this tension particularly clearly. Quickfall (2025) shows how reduced contractual hours can support continued employment while simultaneously generating difficulties where workload does not reduce proportionately.

The same principle may apply to other forms of flexibility. Remote work may remove commuting demands while increasing boundary-management demands. Flexible scheduling may improve personal control while making coordination more difficult. Agile working may enhance autonomy but cannot compensate indefinitely for excessive workload or insufficient staffing.

Flexible working should therefore be understood as a potential resource rather than an inherently positive organisational practice.

Its net effect depends on whether the resources created by flexibility outweigh the demands that remain or emerge.

This interpretation provides a more nuanced application of JD-R theory to retention and helps explain why the relationship between flexibility and employee outcomes can vary across studies and organisational settings.

Cross-study synthesis: three conditions for retention-enhancing flexibility

Comparison across the reviewed evidence suggests that flexible working is most likely to contribute positively to retention when three conditions are present.

First, flexibility must provide meaningful employee control. Employees need sufficient discretion for the arrangement to alter the practical organisation of work rather than functioning only as a nominal policy.

Second, flexibility must be organisationally supported. Managerial behaviour, organisational culture and workload practices must enable employees to use flexibility without substantial penalties or resistance.

Third, flexibility must be occupationally feasible. The arrangement must reflect the practical requirements of the job rather than reproducing a generic model of flexibility developed for a different occupational setting.

These conditions can be expressed as:

Retention-enhancing flexibility = meaningful control + organisational support + occupational feasibility.

The expression is conceptual rather than mathematical. Its purpose is to summarise the recurring pattern across the reviewed studies.

When all three conditions are present, flexibility is more likely to function as a job resource and a signal of organisational support.

When one or more conditions are absent, the retention benefit is likely to weaken. Formal flexibility without employee control may become symbolic rather than useful. Employee control without managerial support may become difficult to sustain. Organisationally supported flexibility that is incompatible with the requirements of the job may be operationally unrealistic.

This three-condition synthesis represents a central finding of the integrative review.

Integrative conceptual framework

The synthesis supports a conditional pathway through which flexible-working practices may contribute to employee retention. The proposed framework distinguishes the formal availability of flexible working from employees' actual experience of flexibility and positions managerial and organisational implementation as the mechanism connecting the two.

The framework proposes that formal flexible-working provision does not influence retention automatically. Instead, its effect depends on whether organisational and managerial implementation converts formal policy into experienced flexibility. When employees experience meaningful control over their working arrangements, flexibility may increase autonomy and work-life compatibility while simultaneously communicating organisational support and professional trust.

These mechanisms connect the two theoretical perspectives underpinning the review. From a Job Demands-Resources perspective, autonomy, control and work-life compatibility represent potential job resources that may offset work and non-work demands. From a Social Exchange Theory perspective, organisational support and professional trust influence how employees interpret their relationship with the employer.

The resulting job satisfaction and organisational attachment may subsequently reduce intention to leave and strengthen intention to remain. Employee retention and workforce stability are positioned as the longer-term organisational outcomes of this pathway rather than as automatic consequences of flexible-working provision.

Importantly, the pathway is conditional. Occupational feasibility, managerial support, organisational culture and workload compatibility determine whether flexible working can operate effectively within a particular job. Employee circumstances, including caring responsibilities, health needs and career stage, may further influence the value attached to flexibility.

The central proposition emerging from the framework is therefore:

Formal flexibility → supportive implementation → experienced flexibility → employee resources and positive organisational exchange → stronger organisational attachment → reduced withdrawal intention → employee retention and workforce stability.

Strength and limitations of the current evidence

The reviewed evidence provides reasonably consistent qualitative support for the importance of flexibility within retention-related experiences, but the strength of causal inference remains limited.

Several included studies are qualitative and context-specific. Their value lies in identifying mechanisms and organisational conditions rather than estimating a population-level effect of flexible working on turnover.

This distinction is important.

The review provides stronger evidence for the proposition that inflexibility can contribute to decisions to leave and that meaningful flexibility can make employment more sustainable than

Figure 2: Integrative framework linking flexible-working practices to employee retention

Stage	Construct	Proposed role in the retention pathway
1. HR practice	Formal flexible-working provision	Establishes the organisational availability of flexible working arrangements.
↓		
2. Implementation	Managerial and organisational implementation	Determines whether formal policies are accessible, supported and practically usable.
↓		
3. Employee experience	Experienced flexibility and employee control	Converts formal flexibility into meaningful discretion over the organisation of work.
↓		
4. Key mechanisms	Autonomy • Work-life compatibility • Perceived organisational support • Professional trust	Generates job resources and positive perceptions of the employee-organisation relationship.
↓		
5. Attitudinal outcomes	Job satisfaction and organisational attachment	Strengthens employees' positive relationship with work and the employing organisation.
↓		
6. Retention intention	Lower intention to leave / stronger intention to remain	Reduces withdrawal intentions and increases willingness to continue employment.
↓		
7. Organisational outcome	Employee retention and workforce stability	Represents the proposed longer-term organisational outcome.

Boundary conditions: occupational feasibility • managerial support • organisational culture • workload compatibility • caring responsibilities • employee health circumstances • career stage.

for a numerical claim that a particular flexible-working intervention reduces turnover by a given magnitude.

The evidence is also strongest in healthcare and public-service settings. Four of the eight included empirical studies concern NHS or healthcare work. The conceptual framework should therefore be treated as theoretically transferable but not yet empirically validated across the entire English workforce.

These characteristics favour an explanatory rather than causal interpretation of the findings.

Research gaps emerging from the synthesis

Three gaps are particularly evident.

First, England-specific post-COVID research examining flexible working and retention remains concentrated in healthcare, education, policing and social work. More evidence is required from private-sector and professional-service organisations.

Second, many studies examine employee experiences, retention preferences or intentions rather than observed longitudinal turnover. Future research should link flexible-working availability and utilisation to subsequent employment records.

Third, the literature frequently measures whether flexibility is available without sufficiently distinguishing formal availability from experienced usability.

Future empirical research should therefore measure at least four separate elements:

- Whether flexible-working arrangements are formally available;
- Whether employees request or use those arrangements;
- Whether managers and organisational systems support their use; and Whether employees experience the resulting arrangement as providing genuine control.

Longitudinal research could then establish whether these dimensions independently or jointly predict subsequent retention.

The present review therefore identifies not only a need for more evidence, but a need for greater conceptual precision in how flexible working itself is measured.

DISCUSSION

Overview of the findings

This integrative review examined how and under what organisational conditions flexible-working practices influence employee retention in England in the post-COVID-19 era. The synthesis suggests that the relationship is more complex than a straightforward association between the availability of flexible working and employees' decisions to remain. Across healthcare, education, policing and social work, flexibility appeared to matter principally when it changed employees' practical experience of work and enabled employment to remain compatible with their personal and occupational circumstances (Alkan et al., 2026; Chamanga et al., 2025; Charman and Tyson, 2024; Ejebu et al., 2025; Murphy, 2026; Quickfall, 2025; Remnant et al., 2025).

The central argument emerging from the review is that formal flexibility should be distinguished from experienced flexibility. An organisation may formally offer flexible-working arrangements without employees necessarily obtaining meaningful control over their work. Managerial resistance, excessive workloads, occupational constraints or organisational norms may reduce the practical value of formally available arrangements. Conversely, where flexible working is accessible, supported and compatible



with the requirements of the role, it may enable employees to manage caring responsibilities, health needs and other work-life demands while simultaneously strengthening perceptions of organisational support.

The findings therefore suggest that flexible working should not be conceptualised as an isolated retention intervention. Its retention value is conditional on the organisational environment through which flexibility is implemented.

Three conditions appear particularly important: meaningful employee control, organisational support and occupational feasibility. Together, these conditions determine whether flexible working operates as a genuine job resource and a positive component of the employee-organisation relationship.

From formal flexibility to experienced flexibility

A principal contribution of the review is the distinction between formal and experienced flexibility.

Much discussion of flexible working concentrates on whether organisations provide particular arrangements, such as hybrid working, part-time employment, flexible scheduling or job sharing. The present synthesis indicates that policy availability alone provides an incomplete explanation of employee outcomes.

The distinction is particularly visible in Charman and Tyson's (2024) analysis of voluntary police resignations. The organisational problem was not simply the complete absence of flexible-working possibilities, but employees' experiences of inflexibility when their circumstances required meaningful adaptation. Remnant et al. (2025) similarly demonstrate how organisational responsiveness becomes important where employees experience fluctuating health conditions. Quickfall (2025) provides a further illustration: reduced contractual hours do not necessarily create meaningful flexibility where workload expectations remain disproportionately high.

These findings suggest that the organisational value of flexible working emerges through a conversion process:

formal provision → organisational implementation → experienced flexibility.

Managerial and organisational implementation occupies a critical position in this process. Policies create the possibility of flexibility, but managers, workloads, organisational norms and operational requirements determine whether employees experience genuine discretion.

This distinction may help explain apparently inconsistent findings within the broader flexible-working literature. Organisations can report similar policies while producing very different employee experiences. Consequently, future research may obtain greater explanatory power by measuring employees' experienced flexibility rather than relying primarily on organisational policy availability.

Theoretical contribution to Job Demands-Resources theory

The findings extend the application of Job Demands-Resources theory to flexible working and retention.

JD-R theory proposes that job resources support motivation and help employees manage job demands, whereas excessive demands can contribute to strain and adverse organisational outcomes (Demerouti et al., 2001; Bakker and Demerouti, 2007, 2017). Flexible working can function as such a resource by increasing employee control and enabling employees to manage the interface between employment and non-work responsibilities.

The present synthesis, however, indicates that flexibility should not automatically be classified as a job resource.

Its resource value depends on whether the arrangement changes employees' actual experience of work.

For example, part-time employment may appear to increase temporal flexibility, but its resource value is weakened where workload remains equivalent to full-time expectations (Quickfall, 2025). Similarly, flexible scheduling may offer limited protection against excessive workload or unsupportive organisational practices.

This suggests an extension to the JD-R interpretation of flexible working: flexibility becomes a job resource through experienced control rather than through formal availability alone.

Experienced flexibility may increase resources through several pathways. It can strengthen autonomy, increase control over working time, improve compatibility between work and caring responsibilities and enable employees to manage health-related constraints. These resources may make continued employment more sustainable.

At the same time, flexible working may create demands. Remote or agile working can generate boundary-management difficulties, while reduced-hours arrangements may produce work intensification where responsibilities are not adjusted. The net effect of flexible working therefore depends on the balance between resources created and demands retained or generated.

The review consequently contributes to JD-R theory by positioning experienced flexibility as a conditional job resource whose value depends on organisational implementation, workload compatibility and occupational context.

Theoretical contribution to Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory provides a complementary explanation of why flexible working may influence retention.

Blau (1964) proposed that favourable treatment can generate reciprocal social obligations. Within employment relationships, organisational actions may therefore influence employees' attitudes and behaviours through perceptions of how the organisation values and treats them. Perceived organisational support research similarly suggests that employees develop beliefs concerning whether organisations value their contribution and care about their wellbeing (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002).

The findings of this review suggest that flexible working can operate as a relational signal.

When organisations respond constructively to caring responsibilities, health circumstances or requests for alternative working arrangements, employees may interpret that response as evidence of organisational support, trust and recognition.

The opposite is equally significant.

A formal flexible-working policy that employees cannot access may communicate a different organisational message. Rejected requests, inconsistent managerial decisions or cultural penalties associated with flexibility may weaken perceptions of organisational support even where an organisation publicly describes itself as flexible.

The social-exchange value of flexible working therefore depends on the consistency between organisational policy and organisational behaviour.

This interpretation extends beyond practical work-life benefits. Cook et al. (2026), for example, demonstrate the relational dimensions of flexible working within schools. Greater discretion can be connected with professional relationships, agency and trust rather than merely convenience.

Flexible working may consequently influence retention through two simultaneous processes: employees obtain practical resources from greater control over work, while also interpreting the organisation's willingness to provide that control as information about the quality of the employment relationship.

Integrating JD-R and Social Exchange Theory

The findings suggest that Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) theory and Social Exchange Theory provide complementary explanations of how flexible working may influence employee retention. Neither perspective alone fully captures the relationship identified across the reviewed evidence. JD-R theory helps explain how flexible working can alter employees' experience of job resources and demands, whereas Social Exchange Theory helps explain how the implementation of flexibility can shape employees' perceptions of organisational support, trust and reciprocity.

From a JD-R perspective, flexible working may provide resources by increasing employee control, autonomy and the capacity to reconcile work with caring responsibilities, health needs and other non-work demands (Demerouti et al., 2001; Bakker and Demerouti, 2007, 2017). However, the findings indicate that these benefits cannot be assumed simply because a flexible-working policy exists. Where workload remains excessive, flexibility is difficult to access or an arrangement provides little genuine discretion, its resource value may be substantially reduced. Flexible working is therefore better understood as a conditional job resource, whose value depends on how employees actually experience it.

Social Exchange Theory provides a complementary relational explanation. Organisational responses to requests for flexibility may communicate whether employees and their circumstances are valued (Blau, 1964). Where managers respond constructively and flexible arrangements are practically accessible, employees may interpret such treatment as evidence of organisational support and professional trust. This interpretation is consistent with perceived

organisational support theory, which emphasises employees' beliefs about whether their organisation values their contribution and cares about their wellbeing (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002).

Conversely, the existence of a formal policy may have limited positive value where employees experience managerial resistance, inconsistent access or organisational cultures that discourage its use. The theoretical importance of flexible working therefore lies not only in the flexibility provided but also in what the organisation's implementation of that flexibility communicates about the employment relationship.

Bringing these perspectives together suggests a sequential pathway from organisational HR practice to employee retention. Table II summarises this theoretical interpretation.

The framework makes an important distinction between formal flexible-working provision and experienced flexibility. Formal provision represents an organisational HR practice, whereas experienced flexibility represents the employee-level outcome of how that practice is implemented. Managerial and organisational implementation therefore acts as the connecting process through which formal policy may—or may not—be converted into meaningful employee control.

This distinction helps integrate the two theoretical perspectives. When implementation produces meaningful flexibility, employees may gain greater autonomy and work-life compatibility, consistent with the resource pathway proposed by JD-R theory. At the same time, supportive implementation may communicate organisational concern and professional trust, consistent with Social Exchange Theory. Flexible working may therefore influence employees through both the design of work and the quality of the employee-organisation relationship.

These mechanisms may subsequently contribute to job satisfaction and organisational attachment, which in turn may be associated with lower intention to leave and stronger intention to

Table 2: Theoretical interpretation of the flexible working–retention pathway

Stage	Construct	Theoretical interpretation
1. HR practice	Formal flexible-working provision	Establishes the organisational availability of flexible-working arrangements but does not itself ensure meaningful employee flexibility.
2. Organisational implementation	Managerial and organisational implementation	Determines whether formal arrangements are accessible, supported and practically usable within the organisational context.
3. Employee experience	Experienced flexibility and employee control	Converts formal policy into meaningful discretion over when, where or how work is undertaken.
4. Resource and relational mechanisms	Autonomy, work-life compatibility, perceived organisational support and professional trust	Connects JD-R and Social Exchange Theory by combining increased job resources with employees' interpretation of organisational support, trust and reciprocity.
5. Employee attitudes	Job satisfaction and organisational attachment	Represents the attitudinal pathway through which positive experiences of flexibility may strengthen employees' relationship with their work and employing organisation.
6. Retention-related intentions	Lower intention to leave / stronger intention to remain	Represents a proximal retention-related outcome associated with more sustainable working conditions and stronger organisational attachment.
7. Organisational outcome	Employee retention and workforce stability	Represents the proposed longer-term organisational outcome where favourable retention-related intentions contribute to continued employment.

Boundary conditions: occupational feasibility; managerial support; organisational culture; workload compatibility; caring responsibilities; employee health circumstances; and career stage.

Note: The pathway represents a conceptual interpretation derived from the integrative synthesis rather than a statistically tested causal model.



remain. However, the distinction between retention intention and actual retention remains important. Although turnover intentions are established predictors of subsequent turnover (Griffeth et al., 2000; Hom et al., 2017), they are not equivalent to observed employee behaviour. Employee retention and workforce stability are therefore positioned as proposed longer-term organisational outcomes rather than inevitable consequences of favourable employee attitudes.

The framework is also explicitly conditional. Occupational feasibility determines which forms of flexibility can realistically be provided within different roles. Managerial support and organisational culture influence whether employees feel able to access available arrangements. Workload compatibility determines whether flexibility creates genuine control or merely changes when and where an unchanged volume of work is completed. Caring responsibilities, health circumstances and career stage may further influence how strongly employees value particular forms of flexibility.

The theoretical contribution of integrating JD-R and Social Exchange Theory is therefore to explain two related questions. JD-R theory helps explain what meaningful flexibility changes in employees' experience of work, while Social Exchange Theory helps explain what supportive flexibility communicates about the employee-organisation relationship. The concept of experienced flexibility connects these processes.

Accordingly, the review proposes that the retention implications of flexible working are unlikely to arise directly from policy availability. Instead, they emerge through the interaction between organisational implementation, experienced employee control, job resources and relational perceptions. This provides a more conditional explanation of flexible working and retention than approaches that treat flexibility simply as an organisational benefit that is either available or unavailable.

Occupational feasibility and the limits of universal flexibility

A further contribution concerns occupational context.

Much contemporary discussion of flexible working has been influenced by the rapid expansion of remote and hybrid work. However, the evidence identified in this review is concentrated largely in occupations where extensive remote working is either impossible or operationally constrained.

Nurses, teachers, police officers and social workers cannot necessarily obtain the same forms of spatial flexibility available to office-based knowledge workers. Yet this does not mean that these occupations are inherently incompatible with flexible working.

Instead, the evidence suggests the importance of job-compatible flexibility.

Job-compatible flexibility refers to arrangements designed around the operational requirements of a particular role while still providing employees with meaningful discretion. For a nurse, this may involve scheduling flexibility or reduced hours. For a teacher, it may involve part-time work, job sharing or flexibility around particular non-contact responsibilities. Other occupations may permit substantially greater location flexibility.

This perspective challenges a standardised approach to organisational flexibility.

Equality of flexible-working provision should not necessarily mean providing identical arrangements to all occupational groups. Rather, organisations may need to consider whether employees across different roles have access to equivalent opportunities for meaningful control, even where the specific form of flexibility

differs.

Occupational feasibility should therefore be treated as a boundary condition rather than as a reason to exclude certain employees from flexibility altogether.

Implications for HRM and organisational practice

The findings have several implications for HR managers and organisational leaders.

First, organisations should evaluate flexible working according to employee experience rather than policy existence. Reporting the number of flexible-working policies available provides limited information about whether employees can actually use those arrangements effectively.

HR functions could therefore supplement policy metrics with measures of employee uptake, approval patterns, perceived managerial support and experienced control.

Second, line managers appear central to the effectiveness of flexible-working policy. Organisations should therefore avoid treating flexibility solely as an HR-policy issue. Managerial capability, discretion and consistency influence whether formal arrangements become practically accessible.

Training managers to evaluate flexible-working requests fairly, manage flexible teams and redesign workload where necessary may therefore be as important as the policy itself.

Third, workload should be considered alongside flexibility. Flexible arrangements that alter hours or location without reconsidering workload may create only superficial flexibility. The experience of part-time teachers described by Quickfall (2025) demonstrates why contractual flexibility can be undermined by unchanged work expectations.

Fourth, organisations should develop role-sensitive rather than one-size-fits-all flexibility. Where remote working is operationally impossible, alternative forms of control should be considered. This may include scheduling autonomy, job sharing, compressed hours, predictable shifts, part-time arrangements or flexibility around particular tasks.

Fifth, flexible working should be integrated into retention strategy rather than treated principally as an employee benefit. The evidence suggests that flexibility interacts with leadership, workload, organisational support, health accommodation and career-stage needs. Consequently, its effectiveness should be considered alongside other dimensions of the employment experience.

Implications for workforce stability

The findings also have implications beyond individual turnover decisions.

Employee retention contributes to broader workforce stability by preserving organisational knowledge, experience and continuity. This may be particularly important in sectors such as healthcare, education, policing and social work, where persistent staffing pressures can increase workloads for remaining employees.

Flexible working may therefore influence workforce stability through cumulative effects.

Where inflexible organisational practices contribute to voluntary departure, the resulting staff shortages may increase demands on remaining employees. Higher demands may subsequently create additional retention pressures, producing a potentially self-reinforcing cycle.

Conversely, flexibility that enables experienced employees to remain may protect organisational knowledge and reduce pressures associated with repeated recruitment and replacement.

This possibility is especially relevant for employees experiencing changing circumstances across the life course. Caring responsibilities, health conditions and career priorities are not static. An organisation capable of adapting working arrangements may retain employees who might otherwise conclude that departure is the only feasible option.

Workforce stability should therefore be understood partly as an organisational capacity to accommodate changing employee circumstances while maintaining operational effectiveness.

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations should be recognised when interpreting the review.

First, this study is an integrative review rather than a comprehensive systematic review. Direct subscription-database searches of Scopus, Web of Science Core Collection and Business Source Complete were not available. The review instead used a structured targeted-search strategy incorporating scholarly web searching, publisher platforms, repositories, PubMed/PMC where appropriate, DOI verification and citation chaining. Relevant evidence may therefore exist that was not identified.

Second, the empirical evidence base is relatively small and unevenly distributed across sectors. Half of the included England-relevant studies concern healthcare or NHS employment. Evidence from private-sector and professional-service organisations is comparatively limited. The proposed framework should consequently be considered conceptually transferable but not yet empirically validated across the entire English workforce.

Third, the included studies are methodologically heterogeneous. Qualitative, quantitative and mixed-method evidence can provide complementary insights, but such heterogeneity limits direct comparison and does not support estimation of a common effect size.

Fourth, much of the evidence concerns employee experiences, retention preferences, intentions to leave or willingness to return rather than observed longitudinal retention behaviour. Turnover intentions are relevant predictors of actual turnover (Griffeth et al., 2000; Hom et al., 2017), but they should not be treated as equivalent to observed retention.

Fifth, the geographical focus creates challenges because some relevant research is reported at UK or England-and-Wales level rather than England alone. Such evidence was interpreted cautiously and was not automatically treated as exclusively England-specific.

These limitations require caution but also identify priorities for future empirical research.

FUTURE RESEARCH

The framework developed through this review provides several directions for future research.

First, future studies should empirically distinguish between formal flexibility and experienced flexibility. Researchers could separately measure policy availability, employee uptake, managerial support and perceived employee control. This would permit direct testing of whether experienced flexibility predicts retention more strongly than formal policy availability.

Second, longitudinal research is needed. Studies could examine employees' flexible-working arrangements and experiences at baseline and subsequently observe actual turnover over one or more years. Such designs would provide stronger evidence

concerning the relationship between flexibility and retention behaviour.

Third, the proposed mediating mechanisms require testing. Future studies could examine whether autonomy, work-life compatibility, perceived organisational support, professional trust, job satisfaction and organisational attachment explain the relationship between experienced flexibility and turnover outcomes.

Fourth, the boundary conditions identified in the review should be investigated. Occupational feasibility, managerial support, workload compatibility, caring responsibilities, health circumstances and career stage may moderate the relationship between flexibility and retention.

Fifth, substantially more England-specific evidence is needed from private-sector and professional-service organisations. Comparative research across public and private sectors would help determine whether the mechanisms identified in this review operate similarly where employees have greater access to hybrid and remote working.

Finally, future research could test the three-condition proposition developed through the synthesis:

Retention-enhancing flexibility = meaningful control + organisational support + occupational feasibility.

Rather than treating this expression as a mathematical relationship, empirical studies could operationalise each component as a measurable construct and examine their independent and interactive relationships with intention to remain and actual employee retention.

CONCLUSION

This integrative review suggests that flexible working and employee retention in England should not be considered as a straightforward link, but rather a conditional one.

A good flexible-working policy is not sufficient to lead to better retention. What matters is whether formal provision becomes managerial and organisational in practice and thus experienced flexibility, giving employees meaningful control of work.

Flexibility that enhances work-life compatibility and autonomy, conveying organisational support and professional trust, can contribute to greater job satisfaction, organisational attachment and less intention to leave. Flexibility is more likely to have a significantly lower retention value if it is nominal, difficult to access, not required by the job, or retained as part of the same workload.

Three main contributions are thus made in the review.

First, it makes the distinction between formal flexibility and experienced flexibility, with the latter being the more theoretically relevant construct to understand retention.

Second, flexible working is incorporated in both Job Demands-Resources theory and Social Exchange Theory, as it can affect employees' work resources as well as their perception of the employee-organisation relationship.

Third, it highlights meaningfully facilitating control, organisational support and occupational feasibility as three conditions for retention-enhancing flexibility.

The framework that this creates moves the organisational discussion away from a focus on "whether" employers should offer flexible working, and also extends the discussion to "how" to create flexible working. The framework this provides takes the organisational discussion from the question of whether employers should offer flexible working, to the question of how. More important, however, for HRM and organisational analysis is the



question of whether employees can actually enjoy flexibility in ways that extend the sustainability of their continued employment, as well as the value of the flexibility to the organisation.

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